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How could we forget du Sable?

City owes founder widespread tribute, his supporters say

By DAN ROZEK
STAFF REPORTER

It's time to give du Sable his due.

That's what supporters of Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable said Saturday as they rallied along the Chicago River near where the Haitian-born immigrant built a home and trading post after he became the first settler to arrive in what would become Chicago.

The community leaders and history enthusiasts want du Sable formally honored every March 4 as Chicago's founder when the city celebrates its birthday.

Du Sable, his admirers say, remains underappreciated.

"He is the founder and the reason we exist," said Antoinette Wright, president of the DuSable Museum of African American History. "He really put an imprint on it, but he wasn't recognized for it."

For years, du Sable, a black man of mixed Haitian and French descent, was overshadowed in the history books and in local honors—including streets and statues named and created in his honor—by later-arriving, white settlers whose names are still familiar in the city: Hubbard, Kinzie, Wentworth.

"It was the climate of the day," Wright said.

It was only in 1999 that city officials formally recognized du Sable as Chicago's founder—almost 225 years after du Sable and his family arrived at the unsettled, fertile land that would later become the city.

Records are sketchy, but historians believe du Sable left Haiti for

New Orleans, then journeyed up the Mississippi River to Missouri and later lived near what would become Peoria. He settled along the north bank of the Chicago River in about 1773, building a home, trading post and farm on land east of present-day Michigan Avenue.

Du Sable, who was married to a Potawatomi Indian woman, presided over a frontier settlement for more than 20 years that in some ways mirrored the diversity found in the sprawling city that exists today. Du Sable's settlement welcomed American Indians as well as Canadians, British, French and Americans.

"There was an incredible fusion of cultures and languages," said Russell Lewis, director of collections at the Chicago Historical Society.

Despite the existence of slavery in the United States, du Sable was the acknowledged leader of the settlement.

"He came here, and he was a leader while others were enslaved," said Haroon Rashid, founder of Friends of du Sable, a community group.

Still, much remains a mystery about du Sable, including when he arrived in the Chicago area, as well as his reasons for selling his property around 1800 and moving away from the region. Even his birthday is unknown, although he is believed to have been born about 1745.

"He's an enigma. There's a lot we don't know about him," Lewis said.

But that lack of knowledge in some ways adds to his appeal, Lewis said. Historians and history buffs are still trying to fill in the gaps about du Sable, which keeps alive interest in the city's founder.

"I meet two or three people a year who have new theories about who he was," Lewis said, calling him "a very powerful symbol for who we are today."

Community leaders, though, say there needs to be more official recognition of the role du Sable



SCOTT STEWART / SUN-TIMES

EvAngel Mama Dee holds a drawing of Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable, the founder of Chicago, during a rally Saturday on Michigan Avenue to call for more citywide recognition of du Sable's accomplishments.

CHICAGO PIONEERS QUIZ

Match the early settler with his claim to fame.

1. Gurdon Hubbard

A. A Haitian immigrant who married a Native American woman, he became Chicago's first non-native settler in about 1773 when he established a farm and trading post on the north bank of the Chicago River.

2. Mark Beaubien

B. A fur trader who was born in Vermont, he was called "the swift walker" by Native Americans because he liked to walk very fast and very far. He wore a buckskin shirt, carried a tomahawk, let his hair grow long and wore a blanket, Indian fashion.

3. John Kinzie

C. A survivor of the Fort Dearborn Massacre in 1812, he was a Canadian-born fur trader whose daughter-in-law wrote a classic early narrative of pioneer Chicago.

4. William B. Ogden

D. Chicago's first mayor, he came here from New York to see what could be done with a muddy tract of land along State Street that a relative had recently purchased for \$100,000. He made a killing selling just a third of the land, fell in love with little Chicago's possibilities, and personally paid for some early city improvements, such as plank sidewalks.

5. Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable

E. Six feet 6 inches tall and a graduate of Dartmouth College, he arrived in Chicago in 1836 with \$30 in his pocket but went on to serve two terms as mayor and five terms in Congress. He once said, "The best way to bring about the repeal of an obnoxious law is to enforce it."

6. John Wentworth

F. He was a Creole from the Detroit area. By 1830, he ran a Chicago tavern, an inn and a ferry at Wolf Point on the Chicago River. He had 23 children, and his brother had 20—more kids between them than the entire population of Chicago in 1829.

ANSWERS: 1:B; 2:A; 3:C; 4:D; 5:A; 6:E

played.

DuSable Museum founder Margaret Burroughs is calling for a 20-story arch to be built in his honor along the Chicago River, or even straddling the river near where du Sable once lived.

"I think that would be a proper monument," Burroughs said, pledg-

ing to push that idea to Mayor Daley and other city officials.

Lewis thinks at the very least Pioneer Court along Michigan Avenue at the north bank of the Chicago River should be renamed in du Sable's honor, particularly because that spot is thought to be near where du Sable settled.

Wright and other black community leaders think that with more exposure, more residents—of all races—will realize that du Sable left a vital legacy worth honoring today.

"The more we know about our past," Wright said, "the more we find common ground."

Not much name recognition for first settler

By DAN ROZEK
STAFF REPORTER

In Chicago, prominent names usually carry a lot of clout on city streets.

Chicago's first mayor, William Butler Ogden, has a grade school, a busy avenue and at least 13 businesses named after him. Gurdon Hubbard, a fur trader in frontier Chicago who later became a business tycoon, has his name on a street, a high school and a cave—the dimly lit tunnel on the Kennedy Expy.

Chicago's first settler, a black, Haitian-born immigrant named Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable, has history on his side but until recent years at least, apparently lacked the clout to leave his name as widely on Chicago's street map.

Just two tiny streets were named for du Sable—Jean Avenue, a two-block long street on the West Side, and the oddly named De Saible Street, a private, blocklong South Side street.

John Kinzie, a later white settler, however, has a 55-block avenue

named in his honor, while two other streets—Ellen Street and Marion Court—are named for his daughter, Ellen Marion Kinzie. Another street is thought to have been named for his son-in-law, Dr. Alexander Wolcott.

Du Sable, though, did get a high school named in his honor, as well as the DuSable Museum, the nation's first African-American history museum, and Du Sable Harbor.

A new park at the mouth of the Chicago River also bears his name, but the site is tainted with toxic waste that needs to be cleaned up

before it can be used for recreation. A statue also is being planned in his honor.

Other early Chicagoans couldn't be blamed for feeling slighted.

Mark Beaubien, an early settler famed for fathering 23 children while he ran a tavern, inn and ferry along the Chicago River, has a small, four-block-long street named in his honor. But there's no Chicago school named for him—that honor went to his brother, Jean Baptiste Beaubien, although he fathered only 20 children.



A high school and museum are named after du Sable.